

Handling with reverence

Thomas O'Loughlin

I suspect many Christians have been taken aback by Cardinal Sarah's judgment that communion in the hand is the most recent engagement between the good angels, and Lucifer and his demons (*Tablet*, 23 February). As to the Cardinal's evidence for this battle in the cosmic struggle, I shall not comment; but as to his liturgical judgment that a particular ritual form, receiving on the tongue while kneeling, 'is much more suited to the sacrament itself,' some comments can be made.

Exactly when receiving on the tongue became common is by no means clear – the evidence is incidental – but it is certainly a result of the move to unleavened 'altar bread' which spread in the west in the ninth and tenth centuries. We know this because one can only receive on the tongue if one has a flat disc-shaped wafer that can be slotted into the mouth or which will adhere and balance on out-stretched tongue. Why the west gradually moved to unleavened bread has been matter of controversy, but it was an innovation (later claims of its continuity from antiquity are simply false), was confined to western Europe (it was a significant factor in the rift with the Greek churches), and was accompanied by another development: people stopped going to communion. Actually eating at the Eucharistic Feast became so uncommon that in 1215 it has to be insisted on, with a threat of sin and punishment, that every Catholic went at least once a year. What became known as the 'Easter Duty' effectively became a maximum – and it would only be in the twentieth century that 'frequent communion' again became common. So while it is easy to reminisce about 'reverence' in earlier times, we should recognize that it was a reverence so tied up with fear 'lest one condemn oneself' (1 Cor 11:29-30) that it vitiated our whole vision of our gathering as one of joyful thanks to the Father for what he has done for us in Christ.

Reverence is not a cowering fear, but a true acknowledgement of what we are about. We have been gathered as disciples at the Table of the Lord, a table which recalls the past of Jesus at his Last Supper, anticipates the heavenly Banquet, and is now a table of encounter with the Lord in eating and drinking as the community of faith. We are sharing with the Lord. We are not there as 'takers' or 'receivers' – our inherited language plays us false and far from promoting reverence can all too easily lead to a pious consumerism. That latter notion is promoted by the use of pre-cup individual wafers, suitable for the tongue, but which miss the central image of all our scriptural accounts of the Eucharist. There the emphasis is on a single *loaf* which is broken and shared. 'Jesus took a loaf, and having blessed [the Father], he broke it ... and said "take, eat" ...' (Mt 26:26). For Paul, this sharing which presumes each participant using their hands to eat – as is the normal way with adults – is the key. It was the lack of sharing in Corinth that gave rise to severe rebuke, and this reflection: 'because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf' (1 Cor 10:17). We have only to look at the great paten pictured in the hands of Justinian in the Ravenna mosaics to see that this was the

key theme in the patristic period. Likewise, the large Derrynaflan Paten (larger than a dinner plate) in Dublin, with room for a loaf broken into over 70 pieces, to see what it was like in practice. Once one has a broken leavened loaf, irregular cube-like morsels, one has to use one's own hand, and while we have sermons about those broken loaves, we have no hint of fear of irreverence. Rather there is the encouragement that if you have dipped your hand in that dish, you would not betray the Lord (cf. Mt 26:23).

Defending an action that emerged from defective practice / perception also raises more profound issues. Does it reflect viewing the sacraments as sacral commodities rather than particular manifestations of the primordial sacraments of the creation and the Christ? The Christ is present in many ways and many places, it is not a case of 'presence' / 'absence.' If the Eucharist is 'the centre and summit' of the Christian life, then must it involve continuities with the rest of our lives? In every sharing of food we are invited, as disciples, to be thankful – Eucharist has deep roots – and to see our meals as an instance of being Christians. In handling all food, sharing and eating, we are already in the domain of reverence – and this attitude reaches its summit when we handle shares of the common life and shared cup. If we think of the priest as standing and distributing, and the communicant as kneeling and receiving in the manner of a fed infant, are we not slipping into a binary vision of liturgy: the priest is active, the agent, the adult, and the laity are passive, receivers, children? But we have the dignity of being equal before God, given a place at his table. And, for Paul, anything indicating inequality at that table divides Christ's body.